

Kunapipi

Volume 16 | Issue 1

Article 9

1994

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Elaine Lindsay

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Recommended Citation

Lindsay, Elaine, Women Rising: Spirituality in the Writings of Barbara Hanrahan, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/9>

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Women Rising: Spirituality in the Writings of Barbara Hanrahan

Abstract

Pink roses everywhere, roses raining from a blue summer sky, and a green beanstalk man reaching down with his leafy green fingers and snatching my grandmother away. Puffballs of Father Christmas thistles, poppies spilling their black birth dust. My grandmother's legs float higher; they're patterned with veins and the !>terns of an unnatural garden: witch bell, star flower. She is a giant earth mother in the sky; she is the girl she used to be. Black shiny hair full of diamond-bright sun sparks, threaded with satin ribbon; sleepy almond eyes, forget-me-not blue; all the wrinkles gone away and she's the goddess of the rainbow. She floats, she dissolves. She is just a great white cloud spread across the sky. Iris floating free over all the gardens of Rose Street.¹

ELAINE LINDSAY

Women Rising: Spirituality in the Writings of Barbara Hanrahan

Pink roses everywhere, roses raining from a blue summer sky, and a green beanstalk man reaching down with his leafy green fingers and snatching my grandmother away. Puffballs of Father Christmas thistles, poppies spilling their black birth dust. My grandmother's legs float higher; they're patterned with veins and the stems of an unnatural garden: witch bell, star flower. She is a giant earth mother in the sky; she is the girl she used to be. Black shiny hair full of diamond-bright sun sparks, threaded with satin ribbon; sleepy almond eyes, forget-me-not blue; all the wrinkles gone away and she's the goddess of the rainbow. She floats, she dissolves. She is just a great white cloud spread across the sky. Iris floating free over all the gardens of Rose Street.¹

When discussing spirituality and the religious impulse in Australian literature, literary critics and theologians draw their illustrations from the writings of male poets and fiction writers, virtually ignoring the work of women writers. There are occasional exceptions, references to poets such as Judith Wright and Rosemary Dobson, but scant attention has been paid to the spiritual and theological content of novels and stories by contemporary women writers. Until recently, too, most Australian feminists with an interest in theology have looked elsewhere for expressions of women's experience of the divine, to American writers such as Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker and Denise Levertov. This lack of acknowledgement given to local women writers deserves comment, especially as there are in circulation many books by Australian women which reflect seriously upon matters moral, religious and spiritual.

My purpose here is to uncover the spiritual and religious dimensions of the writings of Barbara Hanrahan (1939-1991) whose visions, all be they idiosyncratic, are also emblematic of the approaches many women are adopting when they address the divine. The fact that these approaches differ markedly from the Christian 'malestream' spirituality which is often regarded as Australian spirituality incarnate may account in large part for society's inability to interpret the words of women. For these women refuse to celebrate a desert spirituality which locates meaning in a distant emptiness or to laud the male pilgrim who sacrifices all in search of the divine, preferring instead to portray the world as a paradise garden where the divine is present in all things and in all people and where creativity,



Barbara Hanrahan

loving kindness and joy are the ways to God. Typically, 'malestream' spirituality encourages a turning towards a transcendent God, away from the fallenness of creation as epitomized by the ravenous maw of mother nature, while women's spirituality revels in the goodness of creation and finds in it evidence of an immanent God. Women have learnt to empathize with desert spirituality but men – and this is to generalize – have failed to recognize the spirituality of the settled areas and have dismissed women fiction writers as having nothing to say that is of theological importance.

I have chosen the writings of Barbara Hanrahan to illustrate aspects of women's spirituality because of their richness and diversity; her prints and paintings, while they have informed this reading, are not the subject of the discussion which follows and still await informed exposition. A prolific writer as well as a prolific artist, Hanrahan wrote fifteen books, of which five may be described as 'autobiographical fictions', five as 'fantastic fictions' and five as 'biographical fictions'. The three categories of books are quite different from one another: the autobiographical fictions published between 1973–1992 record their narrator's coming into creativity and her recognition of the divine spark within, the fantastic fictions (1977–82) are meditations upon evil, and the biographical fictions (1985–92) are celebrations of the sacredness of the everyday, the spirituality of the humble. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these books singly it is possible, by concentrating on the three categories, to offer a perspective which will encourage the reading of each book as a spiritual, moral and religious document and as a refreshing alternative to the desert spirituality that holds sway in Australian critical and theological commentaries.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTIONS AND INNER SPIRITUALITY

Barbara Hanrahan made no bones about the religious nature of her calling as an artist and writer:

I have always felt close to God. I have a strong belief in what I do – I have always known I was meant to live the life that I do. It would have been wicked – evil – if I had tried to do otherwise, to escape my responsibility to my talents.²

For Hanrahan, writing and print-making were as religion to her;³ it was the creative act which brought her into contact with 'something so much greater than oneself'.⁴ The formal practice of religion, however, was of little interest to her, critical as she was of the narrowness of mind and lack of humanity which often lurks behind the espousal of doctrine and dogma. Hanrahan's wish seems to have been to live the life of the spirit, a hope she described with reference to William Blake:

When I read something of Blake's or look at his engravings, I find a world I feel at ease in: his spiritual world was with him all the time, there wasn't any difference between that world and this. That to me is an ideal state.⁵

It is always tempting to conflate a writer's life with the lives of her (or his) characters and the temptation with Hanrahan is strong, particularly in the autobiographical fictions, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, *Sea-Green*, *Kewpie Doll*, *Iris in Her Garden* and *Michael and Me and the Sun*. Of these books *Sea-Green* is the most consciously fictionalized, but all share the same narrator, most often unnamed, who grows up in Adelaide, who is torn between society's expectations of her as a woman who will marry and bear children and her own creative aspirations, and who leaves Australia to study art in England. To what extent the recurring figures of Bob, Ronda, Iris and Reece can be equated with Hanrahan's similarly named 'real' father, mother, grandmother and great-aunt is not an issue here, for the focus of attention is on the narrator's journey of self-discovery, much of which, on the evidence of interviews and frankly autobiographical material, can be regarded as Hanrahan's own journey.

Hanrahan's writings invite a variety of readings. The autobiographical fictions might be regarded as an account of a young person's journey to psychological maturity or to artistic fulfilment, as comment upon a woman's struggle to overturn the dominant patriarchal and imperial order, or as a search for an Australian identity, the exploration of an Australian consciousness. In the context of this article they could also be read as a journey into spiritual wholeness, an attempt to reconcile the contradictions between the social and real selves and to nourish the child within, the spark of divine creativity. Instead of seeking God in what are often described as the waste places of the desert, Hanrahan finds God within herself and within the suburban hills, gardens and homes of Adelaide, the sacredness of daily life expressed in the rituals of women and family, in their care for nature and each other.

This understanding did not come easily, as witnessed in *The Scent of Eucalyptus* where the narrator records that

it was in the wild night garden that I discovered I did not fit into the snug electric world as others did – as they thought they did. I discovered I was different, yet I did not know where the real world lay (I was still too blinkered to know its face; I was not yet simple enough to know that it dwelt inside me, waiting to be reclaimed).⁶

The importance to Hanrahan of the search for a unified self which would be at peace with the physical and spiritual worlds can be gauged by the fact that she returned again and again in her books to the period 1939 to the mid-1960s, when this search was most painful and intense. Significantly, she felt no need to write publicly of her life as a successful artist and writer – her autobiographical fictions do not go beyond the point at

which she realized the possibility of living a life dedicated to and permeated by the art she likened to a religious quest. One must assume that, once Hanrahan had accepted her vocation, her inner tensions receded and she was able to focus her energies on more creative work. It may not be too far-fetched to liken Hanrahan's life to that of a mystic, noting in particular her withdrawal from the more commercial aspects of literary and artistic life, her refusal to compromise her work in order to achieve wider recognition, her abiding sense of the presence of God, her delight in the unity and sacredness of created things and her longing to be absorbed into the mystery, the perfection of it all.

FANTASTIC FICTIONS: CORRUPTION AND THE VANITIES

Hanrahan's brace of fantastic fictions, *The Albatross Muff*, *Where the Queens all Strayed*, *The Peach Groves*, *The Frangipani Gardens* and *Dove*, have roused a variety of reactions amongst literary critics, ranging from discomfort to appreciation. It is men who appear the most uneasy, overwhelmed by 'the author's characteristic preoccupations ... with physical ugliness and maiming, sexual perversion and obsession, the processes of the body and grotesquerie of various kinds',⁷ but they seem incapable of asking why Hanrahan chose to use such material. Women, in comparison, have been generally more receptive, recognizing the seriousness of Hanrahan's explorations of good and evil, reality and illusion, innocence and experience. I would suggest that in these books Hanrahan is offering a series of meditations upon all that can happen when evil, carnality and greed are allowed to run unchecked in isolated societies. In doing so she addresses subjects as diverse as the individual's search for wholeness; the innocence of children and the debilitating effects of sexuality and society, especially upon women; the feebleness and hypocrisy of conventional religion; the life-denying qualities of avarice, materialism and witchcraft; the healing powers of nature; the relationship between secular and sacred time; the loveliness of death which will make us whole; and the potential of art to transcend the mundane, to endure, and to enter into the mystery of being.

Given Hanrahan's distrust of formal religion, it should be expected that these meditations will have nothing of conventional piety about them. At best religious formulae are portrayed as hindering independent speculation into the meaning of life and the possibility of salvation, at worst religion is a smoke screen hiding the immorality and falseness of those who practise it. For people who would come to terms with their true selves, their best recourse is not belief in a 'Willy-wetleg Jesus'⁸ but dedication to the arts; thus it is that Edith/Dissy, the one character of *The Albatross Muff* who does achieve a sense of Oneness, of purpose, meaning and future does so through her writing, not through religious adherence. But this is not to deny the possibility that God inspires artists, true artists

rather than maidenly daylight daubers. Doll Strawbridge's night-time incarnation in *The Frangipani Gardens* might well be regarded as a model of the artist as prophet, freed from all inhibitions:

The stars shone brightly, and the moon somehow swooped, and the quinces hung like dusty yellow lanterns. There was light all about her, and Tom saw she wasn't Auntie but a stranger. She wasn't timid and ladylike; she was still the bold artist who'd painted in the dark without a fumble, as if she were guided by God. Her blind eyes were shining, she'd left off her spectacles, her hair shed its pins to float loose. She had paint all over her fingers and it was smeared on her face – she was a painted queen jumped free of a portrait, though her dress swirled as Queen Mary's never would. Tom ran down the crazy path behind her. Where was she going, what did she seek?⁹

In these books Hanrahan captures well the sense of mystery which permeates the everyday, intimating that behind the material world is a spirit world which must be confronted unless life is to remain a mean and shallow thing.

While the books canvas a range of preoccupations, one is left with the impression that it is the nature and necessity of evil which most fascinates Hanrahan at this time of her life. Again she offers a distinctive perspective, suggesting not that evil must be fought and overcome by goodness, but that evil and good must be kept in check for both are parts of the one whole. When evil does run rampant it collapses under its own weight, in the same way that those who call down evil upon others eventually become evil's prey. Hanrahan reminds her readers how thin is the veneer of civilization behind which we shelter from the dark forces.

It is fitting that *Dove*, the last novel in this sequence, concludes with a massive conflagration which, whether or not it promises the establishment of a new, less exploitative society in Depression Adelaide, does mark the end of Hanrahan's meditations on the vanities, the sins to which the flesh is heir. As *The Albatross Muff* was a transitional novel, still working out some of the concerns of the autobiographical fictions, particularly the development of the self as artist, so *Dove* clears the way for the biographical fictions, burning away hypocrisy and false values to enable a celebration of endurance, patience and loving kindness within the most ordinary of lives.

BIOGRAPHICAL FICTIONS: THE SACREDNESS OF THE EVERYDAY

Perhaps Hanrahan's greatest contribution to the development of Australian women's spirituality can be found in her biographical fictions, *Annie Magdalene*, *Dream People*, *A Chelsea Girl*, *Flawless Jade* and *Good Night, Mr Moon*, most of which are monologues or stories based on the lives of people known to her but unremarked by the world. It is here that

Hanrahan turns outwards to acknowledge the heroic qualities of those who quietly go about the task of living and caring for family and neighbours. These people do not need to cast off attachments and responsibilities to enter into a search for a distant God because they already enjoy the comfort of a present God. They may endure loss and hardship but they do not need to rationalize it in terms of mortification of the flesh, the ego. They do not rail against their circumstances but take life as it comes, accommodating to it but not compromising themselves, buoyed up by a simple trust that eventually all will be well:

I thought there was Somebody looking over us. I believed in Heaven, I believed there was an Almighty above – though a lot of people didn't think so and said it was a lot of rubbish. I never laid my head down any night without I didn't say a prayer and thank the Almighty for seeing me safely through another day.¹⁰

It should be noted that, in comparison with the characters who populate Hanrahan's other books, the heroines of these novels, as well as most of the Dream People, are 'whole' people, untroubled by the tensions of a divided self. This may be because they are older people who have come to reflect that, whatever has befallen them, they have survived. But perhaps there is also an optimism that, when the curtains are drawn back, a new form of life will begin. Sarah Hodge in *A Chelsea Girl*, for example, is already half out of this troublesome world and has turned her gaze towards another existence in the life of the spirit. The gift that Hanrahan offers her readers through these characters is the opportunity to advance prematurely to the end of physical life, to reflect upon its meaning, to distinguish what is true and necessary from what is worthless, and to bring that knowledge back into their own reality.

In creating archetypal life-giving figures such as Annie Magdalene, Sarah Hodge, Alexandra Rodda and, in her autobiographical fictions, Iris Goodridge, Hanrahan not only offers a vastly different set of heroes to those favoured by malestream spirituality – the explorer, the digger, the bushranger, the soldier and the sportsman – but also insists upon the sacredness of the suburbs, the cities and the cultivated areas, the areas traditionally associated with women and children. The values she upholds are those which, like loving kindness, facilitate relations between people and make it easier for them to find God where they are, in the midst of life. In her love for all creation she offers a positive antidote to that distrust – if not fear – of nature so often evinced by Australian male theologians and cultural commentators. In Hanrahan, in place of the whore/temptress/bitch land which lures men to their downfall we have the figure of Annie Magdalene in her garden, the earth goddess herself as she tends to the smallest creatures of creation:

In summer, when I have short sleeves, the bees sit on my arm. They don't worry me at all, I think they love me; I just let them stay (if you brush them off they get cross), they're only sitting there to have a rest. The bees often come and sit beside me to die - such a lot do that and I dig a little hole, drop them in and cover them up, rather than let the ants eat them. When I pick off the dead flowers from the daisy bushes, I tell the bees they have to put up with me. But you must never talk loud to the bees, you must talk softly.¹¹

In these books, as in all of Hanrahan's books, God is intimately linked with images of the garden and the fecundity of nature - the waterless desert and the patriarchal Father God are nowhere to be found. If one were to encapsulate Hanrahan's expression of the divine one could not go past her several Eye of God prints where the genderless and open eye of God, flanked by a smiling sun and moon, gazes out of a treasury of birds, stars, animals, flowers, insects and humans. Symbols of power and authority are eschewed in these celebrations of bountifulness, joy and the co-existence of this world and the spiritual world.¹²

CONCLUSION

I am suggesting that, however one wishes to read Barbara Hanrahan, she should be considered first as a spiritual writer working out of a contemplative - if not mystical - awareness of the divine and the role of love in the world. As she wrote in her diary:

The only way I can influence the 'world' is by being small, by being true to me and the real world of nature about me. Like a monk, like a hermit who works through prayer. By praying, by working, by *loving* the sea and the trees and the sky. By knowing God in the goodness of it all. By making my own peace. Not by dwelling on the evil, adding to it.¹³

What would such a reading achieve? Specifically, it would draw Hanrahan's writing, art and life together into a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. The repetitions, obsessions, details and apparent banalities which have troubled some critics would be seen as serving Hanrahan's overall purpose of challenging stereotypes of Australian belief and behaviour and of offering instead the truths of lives honestly led, of insights gained by those who are close to nature and the divine. Such a reading would concentrate attention on Hanrahan's particular contribution to Australian self-understanding, her critique of the masculinist spirituality which still dominates cultural and theological discourse and her visioning of an alternative spirituality, one which is based on the fact that women have walked in the paradise garden and found it very good.

NOTES

1. Barbara Hanrahan, 'Iris in Her Garden', *Iris in Her Garden* (Deakin: Officina Brindabella, 1991) pp. 58-59.
2. Barbara Hanrahan, personal papers, undated. Thanks to Jo Steele for making this material available.
3. Recorded in Elsebeth Gabel Austin's interview with Barbara Hanrahan, April 1985, *Kunapipi*, 7, 2 and 3 (1985), p. 159.
4. Interview with Julie Mott, 28 August 1980, *Australian Literary Studies*, 11, 3 (May 1983), p. 44.
5. Ibid. p. 158.
6. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 162.
7. Laurie Clancy, 'The full circle before the world', *Australian Book Review*, 63 (August 1984), p. 20.
8. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Peach Groves* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979), p. 47.
9. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Frangipani Gardens* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p. 212.
10. Barbara Hanrahan, *A Chelsea Girl* (London: Grafton, 1988), p. 208.
11. Barbara Hanrahan, *Annie Magdalene* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985), p. 121.
12. See for instance 'The Eye of God' lithograph 1964; 'The Eye of God' linocut 1974; 'Sun and Moon and the Eye of God' linocut 1988; and an untitled work reproduced on the cover of *Antipodes*, 6, 2 (December 1992). The appearance of the sun and sunflowers in many other prints is also reminiscent of the Eye of God.
13. Barbara Hanrahan, diary entry, 11 May 1986, Barbara Hanrahan Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra.